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ABSTRACT

A study explaining the cultural and educational background of Italian immigrants is presented in order that Toronto teachers may better understand the newcomers and their behavior. The largest number of immigrants in Toronto are from Southern Italy where the standard of living is exceptionally low and cultural traditions exert a strong influence upon individuals. In Italy, school facilities, equipment, and the quality of education are poor. Education is controlled by the central government through the Ministry of Public Instruction, providing a highly centralized curriculum with a set number of hours devoted to each subject. Teacher training for elementary teachers, criticized as superficial, begins at age 14 and ends at age 18. Secondary teachers are trained in Universities. Schools maintain a formal and disciplined environment within the classroom. Education is free and compulsory for an eight year period. Elementary school consists of five years of schooling. Middle schools, for children aged 11 to 14, focus upon teaching Latin. Secondary education, dominated by academic, classically-oriented, prestigious lycees, offers five year courses for students aged 14 to 19, with emphasis upon Latin and Greek. The universities are bastions of classical traditions. Closely related documents are SO 004 351 and SO 004 339. (SJM)

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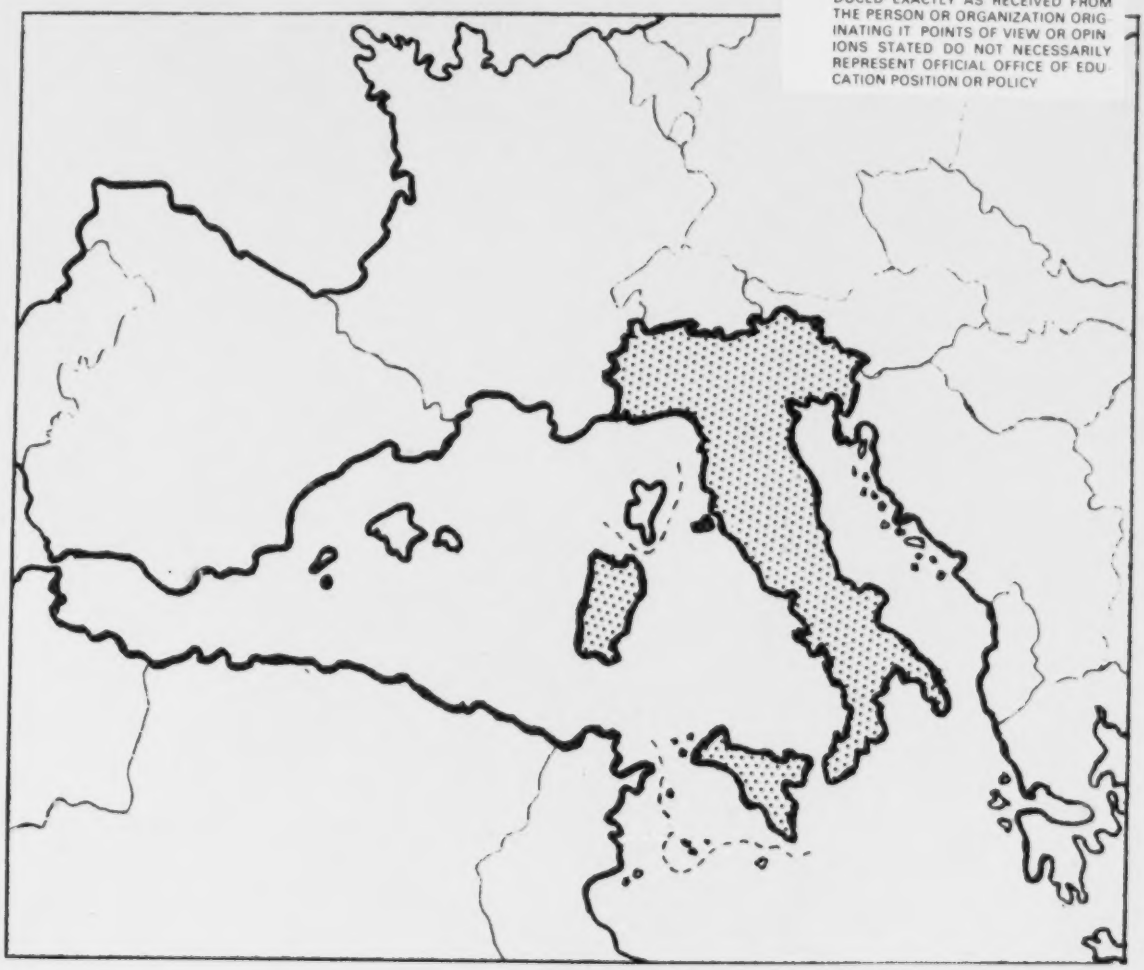

Education and Italy

Rosemary Chapman

May, 1969

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EDUCATION AND ITALY

If you are a teacher in one of Toronto's schools, you probably have several Italian children in your class. Does their behaviour ever puzzle you, set you wondering what makes them tick? You may wonder, at times, about their backgrounds, their families, the sorts of schools they attended in their home towns or villages. This paper is an attempt to provide some answers to these questions.

Background

Your Italian students belong to the largest group of non-English speaking immigrants in Toronto. The number is not known exactly, but since 1945, over 400,000 have come to Canada and in 1967 alone, over 30,000 emigrated to Canada. Like the Greeks,[1] most Italian immigrants are from the lower socio-economic levels and it seems, from talking with Italians in the City, that while some immigrants do come from central Italy and the extreme north of Italy, the vast majority are from the south and Sicily, where the standard of living is much lower and the way of life is in many ways different from the rest of the country (Canada, Department of Manpower and Immigration, 1967).

Life in Southern Italy

A typical Italian student in a Toronto school today has probably been born and brought up in a rural setting in the south of Italy; perhaps his family scraped their living from a small plot of land, or his father was the village baker and the family lived above the bakehouse, or his father was a fisherman and the family lived on the coast. If Gino was

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1 See "Education and Greece," Research Department, The Board of Education for the City of Toronto, 1969.

lucky, his parents were able to afford to send him to school, although he might have had to go barefoot and without a midday meal. Education in Italy is free and compulsory for all children aged 6 to 14, but paper and pencils have to be paid for, and although a certain amount of financial assistance can be obtained for school equipment, there are still many families in the south who cannot afford the cost of schooling. Either they cannot pay for equipment and cannot get help to do so, or they need every hand they have to help the family feed itself. Children of struggling families may attend school spasmodically, or leave early, or they may never go to school at all. Unemployment is a chronic problem and because much of the available work is seasonal, many men are only employed for part of the year.

Living as we do in an affluent society, it is hard to imagine the extent of the poverty which still exists in parts of southern Italy and the islands.[2] For example, in 1953, 50% of families in the southern part of Italy were living below the established breadline. When a family does not know where the next meal is coming from, it is hardly surprising that education is not a high priority, and may even be regarded as a luxury.

Many parents of the present generation of Italian children in Canada have had no more than a few years schooling, many have had no education at all. Over 43% of the population in Italy was illiterate at the end of the Second World War. By 1961, the national figure was reduced to 8.4%, but illiteracy is far lower in the north and may still be as high as 30% in some areas in the south. Conditions are improving slowly, and although the school leaving age was raised from 11 to 14 in 1961, in practice, it is still 11 or less in much of rural Italy. The

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2 Danilo Dolci has written a vivid account in his book, Poverty in Sicily.

compulsory law is not stringently enforced, and there are few inspection procedures. Compared with the north of Italy, the southern part has a smaller proportion of the population at every level of education, and the discrepancy increases at each level. There is a large proportion of drop-outs throughout the school system, and a considerable amount of repetition; for example, a child may be recorded as having five years of schooling, but he may have covered only three grades. The quality of and provisions for education are much poorer in the south (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965).

Since 1950, the government has made concerted efforts to narrow the economic gap between the north and south, to bring industry into the predominantly agrarian, rural south, and to improve farming methods. Large-scale efforts have been made by the Ministry of Education to raise the level of education.

Teleschool

There is, for instance, an outstanding experiment in direct teaching through television, called "Telescuola," which has been in operation for about ten years. It is a joint venture of the Ministry of Education and the National Television Service, and was undertaken to replace vocational schools for the large numbers of children in the south and islands, who were leaving school at 11 or dropping out after only one year in secondary school. Programmes run from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., six days a week from October to June, covering the regular vocational course and preparing students for the regular examinations. Direct instruction is used, with a live class in the television studio which in intended to provide a realistic setting. Children usually come to a communal viewing centre in their village, run by a supervisor who marks their homework. Homework samples are checked

by the control centre in Rome, and a special team of television teachers prepares textbooks and programmes for the course. Some students are well over 14, and attend teleschool at the same time as working (Kennedy, 1961).

Adult Education

Teleschool also operates a programme to teach reading and writing to adult illiterates, called "It is never too late." In the last twenty years, a number of other large-scale efforts have been made to reduce illiteracy among adults. Reading centres have been set up in the most remote, underprivileged areas, evening schools for adults with courses provided at three different levels — for illiterates, semi-literates, or adults with a primary education who are seeking a further training. There are itinerant courses for shepherds, and home courses for women who are too diffident to come to a school, and who meet instead with a teacher in one of their homes (Volpicelli, 1961). The situation is improving slowly, but there is still a long way to go.

Attitudes

There appears to be a difference in attitude between southern and northern Italians.[3] The southern Italian appears to be in many ways resistant to industrialization, seeing the accumulation of wealth as less important than prestige, and preferring to cling to his old ways. For instance, vast funds have been spent on over-elaborate, over-massive public buildings, with little regard for economic efficiency. The attitude of the progressive northerner seems much closer to the North American ethos. Poverty also tends to breed a hopeless attitude which makes a person too apathetic to seek a better way of life. The immigrant is clearly an exception as he must

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3 This impression was gained from talking with Italians in Toronto, and also from a fascinating, if somewhat overstated, account of the Italian character and way of life in Barzini's book, The Italians. New York: Atheneum, 1964.

be able to save enough money for his fare, and also have the will to seek a better life for himself and his family.

The Family

What about your Italian student's more immediate environment, his family? Gino has been brought up within a tightly-knit and extensive family circle.[4] From an early age he has had a responsibility towards his family, to help his father or later, if he has his own job, to contribute his earnings. He may have had to leave school early in order to earn some money to help feed and educate his brothers and sisters. Often Italian immigrants cannot understand why their children should stay on at school when the family is struggling to get on its feet and needs all the earning power it can get. If Gino had stayed in Italy, he would probably have been expected to follow the trade of his father, but since his parents have come to Canada to seek a better life for the family, they are more likely to want their children to better themselves.

Gino has a strong sense of loyalty and responsibility towards his family, which makes it hard for him to go against their wishes. This tie is particularly strong in the south, where a family is closely interdependent from economic necessity. Increased opportunities for education and employment and a higher standard of living, as well as emigration, may in time loosen family ties.

Italian parents are loving and protective towards their children but they discipline them strictly. If Gino does something wrong at his new school in Canada, or brings home a bad report he will be punished and told he has disgraced the family. Outside school hours, his parents feel responsible for his behaviour and, like other European immigrants, tend to be suspicious

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4 There are many similarities between the family in Italy and in Greece, see "Education and Greece," Research Department, The Board of Education for the City of Toronto, 1969. For a description of the Italian family, see Barzini's chapter on the family in The Italians.

of the school or any other agency intruding on home preserves. Although his mother is the central figure in the home, his father is head of the household, the breadwinner, and the ultimate figure of authority.

The Status of Women

Women achieve considerable status as mothers, but it seems that they still play a subservient role in southern Italy. They lead a sheltered existence, their career is seen in terms of marriage and motherhood, and they never achieve economic independence. Schooling is seen as less important for them than for the sons of the family, and there are fewer women than men at every level of education. Illiteracy is higher among women, particularly the older women.

Sexual mores, particularly in the south of Italy, are extremely strict. Virginity is the most prized dowry that a woman can bring to her marriage, and marriages are usually arranged by the parents. A man must court a woman in the presence of her family, and there is no dating. A woman's influence can, however, be indirect; for example, in some parts of rural Italy, it is still believed that women have the power to ensnare men by witchcraft (Risso and Böker, 1967).

The old attitude that women should stay at home and be sheltered within their family circle somehow has to be reconciled with the emancipated view of women which immigrants find here. It seemed, from talking with a group of Italian mothers in Toronto, that they may be more receptive than their husbands to the concept of a new freedom for their daughters, of their daughters and sons having an equal right to education, a career and a free choice in marriage partners.

Early Education

When would Gino have started school? Living in a rural area of Italy, he is unlikely to have gone to kindergarten. Before 1965, all kindergartens were run by various religious and charitable organizations, and only 1.7% of the 3 to 6 age-group attended them (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965). Since then, the government has been setting up its own kindergartens and it claimed that, by 1968, half of the 3 to 6 age group were in school (Ministère de L'instruction Publique, 1968).

Elementary School

Gino probably started school when he was six, in the five-grade elementary school which is universal throughout Italy, and which is the first stage in the eight-year period of free and compulsory schooling.

Education in Italy is controlled by the central government, through the Ministry of Public Instruction. The curriculum and number of hours to be devoted to each subject are laid down by the government, almost to the extent that Gino in his village school in the south of Italy and a child of the same age at school in Milan might have wrestled with the same problem in arithmetic at approximately the same point in time. Although Gino and his peers in Milan probably followed the same curriculum, they worked under very different conditions. In rural Italy particularly in the mountains, schools have one or two teachers and often less than 15 pupils, although the national teacher to pupil ratio was 1 to 26 in 1955 (UNESCO, 1958).[5] Parents in urban areas can afford better equipment, more books, and paper and pencils for their children, than families in rural areas.

Audio-Visual Aids

Audio-visual equipment in any Italian school is still considered

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5 This figure was approximately the same in Canada at the same date, whereas in Greece, for example, the ratio was 1 to 49.

something of a luxury. It has to take a back seat beside priorities such as school buildings; in 1960, for example, Italy was short of 80,000 elementary classrooms in densely populated areas. There are few film projectors in schools, and also there is a tendency to doubt the educational value of films, stemming from the academic traditions in Italian education. Television in Italy is a comparatively recent innovation which operates with only one channel, so that educational programmes have to take their turn with pure entertainment programmes. Apart from the special case of teleschool, there are no specific educational programmes running during school hours or related to the curriculum.

School Calendar

Gino would have attended school from early September to the end of June, with three terms and similar holidays to those in Canadian schools. The timetable allowed for 25 hours of work over six days, although in some areas, schools might be open for five days a week, excluding Thursdays and Sundays. His school day would have started at 8:30 a.m. or 9:00 a.m., and finished around 1:00 p.m. Boys and girls would generally have been taught together, except for practical work.

The Curriculum

Since 1955, the elementary school curriculum has been split into two stages of two and three years respectively. In the first stage, somewhat like kindergarten programmes, Gino's timetable would not have been divided into separate subjects, but would have been similar to the project method; for instance, a topic such as "cars" might be chosen for all the work of a class over a certain period of time (UNESCO, 1958). If Gino had attended school regularly and passed the oral and written examinations at the end of the first stage, he would have gone on to the second stage at the age of eight. Here, he would have graduated to separate subjects,—

including:

Religion
Physical Education
Moral and Civic Education
History and Geography
Arithmetic and Geometry
Science and Hygiene
Italian[6]
Drawing and Handwriting
Singing

Religion

The question of including religious instruction in school curricula has been a live issue for many years but it has remained a compulsory subject since 1930 in both elementary and secondary schools, although a child may be exempted at his parents' request. It must be taught by teachers approved by the Catholic Church. Religious instruction begins at kindergarten level, and the syllabus is laid down throughout each stage of schooling, generally occupying one to two hours on the timetable each week (Scarangello, 1962).

The Catholic Church has always played a leading role in education in Italy. Until the eighteenth century, it had a virtual monopoly over education; almost all schools and universities were run by religious foundations, and teachers were recruited from the clergy. The state began to demand a say in education during the nineteenth century and now, state and non-state schools exist side by side, both subject to control of the Ministry of Education in Rome, both to some extent still imbued with the classical traditions of the Catholic Church. There are still people in Italy who think that education of the young ought to be the prerogative of the Church. The Church has traditionally adopted a cautious attitude towards reform, fearing a secular direction in education.

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6 There would be no second language at this stage.

Today, a "private" school in Italy almost always means a school run by a religious foundation. Until a few years ago, all kindergartens were run by religious foundations; half of them still are. Eleven per cent of the primary and secondary school population in 1962 were in private, mainly Catholic, schools. Large numbers of technical or vocational schools and institutions are privately-run, differing widely in quality. Most training colleges for kindergarten and primary teachers are also run by religious foundations.[7]

Teachers

Gino's teacher could have started her four-year training at 14, at the end of her compulsory schooling, and could have been a qualified teacher at the age of 18.[8] The training of teachers has been a major issue in educational reform for some time. Elementary school training has been criticized as superficial, and secondary school teachers, who are products of university Faculties of Education, are said to know their subject but to be ignorant of how to teach it. The lack of preparation for those intending to be art or technical teachers has been even more severely criticized.

Italy is one of the few countries in the world which does not have a shortage of elementary teachers. Nearly 90% of the qualified elementary teachers do not in fact become teachers. Meanwhile, secondary schools are expanding rapidly and there is a severe shortage of secondary school teachers, particularly in science and technical subjects. Many posts are being filled by unqualified people. Teachers' salaries appear to be reasonably competitive, but apart from the expansion in schools, the shortage of secondary teachers might be partly due to the long years of

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7 In 1967, 345 training colleges for elementary teachers were run by religious orders, opposed to 200 run by the government (Rugiu, 1967).

8 The training period for kindergarten teachers is only three years, so that they may be qualified to teach at the age of 17.

study and competitive examinations, as well as the apparently low social status of teachers (Rugiu, 1967).

Teaching Methods

To Gino, his teacher on her raised dais was a remote figure of authority. Lessons were more formal, and discipline much stricter than Italian students find in Toronto schools. "Learning by experience" is a concept which Italian parents in Canada tend to view suspiciously as a waste of time. Education is a serious business, and Gino would have had homework to do each evening and would have been expected to work hard, with frequent tests and examinations to mark his progress. Italian parents want their children to do well academically, and technical or vocational education is viewed as a poor second-best. They value education whatever their background although there appears to be a tendency among parents of very poor background to feel that education is "not for us," and to be reluctant to believe that their children could or should benefit from secondary and further education.

Repetition and Drop-outs

Gino would have had to pass the primary school certificate to qualify for entry to the next level of schooling, the middle school. The certificate is awarded on oral and written examination results but also now on an assessment of the student's progress throughout the year, and it seems that efforts are being made to ease the transition between the first and second levels of compulsory education, the elementary and middle schools.

If Gino had attended school consistently and had passed all the examinations he would be 11 at the end of elementary school, but repetition is a severe problem in Italian schools. In 1965, for example, 22% of the children in elementary grades were over-age, so that many children in

elementary school may be 14 or older. There is also a high proportion of drop-outs throughout the school system; for example, out of 1,000 children enrolled in the first year of elementary school, 582 obtained their primary school leaving certificate and only 239 went on to complete compulsory schooling[9] (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965).

Gino's chances of continuing his schooling beyond the elementary grades would be less than his peers' from the north, but in the last ten years, the Italian government has been making strenuous efforts to expand post-elementary education, particularly in neglected areas in the south, and by 1967, 80% of children leaving elementary school were enrolled in a middle school (Rugiu, 1967).

Middle School

The three-year middle school came into being in 1963, replacing all previous schools for pupils aged 11 to 14, and by 1967, only 6.9% of the total population were in areas not served by a middle school (Rugiu, 1967).

It was originally intended that the new middle school should blow away some of the classical traditions in Italian education, that Latin should no longer be the core of the curriculum or the main avenue of entry into further education. It was intended that the middle school should be open to all types of students and should provide a free access to all types of further training, but the battle is still going on between the progressives and the traditional devotees. Latin still occupies a central place in the curriculum of the middle school, and to some extent teachers are still trained to think of a knowledge of Latin as the hallmark of the "educated man" (Rugiu, 1967).

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9 Of these 239, 198 continued their studies beyond the age of 14, 130 got a school leaving certificate from a secondary school, and 38 finally obtained a university degree or diploma (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965).

TABLE 1

STANDARD CURRICULUM FOR THE MIDDLE SCHOOLS
(LAID DOWN BY THE MINISTRY FOR PUBLIC INSTRUCTION[10])

Subject	Hours Per Week		
	1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year
Religion	1	1	1
Italian (including basic Latin in 2nd year)	6	9	5
History, Civics, Geography	4	4	4
Mathematics	3	3	3
Modern Language[11]	2	3	3
Science	2	2	3
Art	2	2	2
Technical Training	2	-	-
Music	1	-	-
Physical Training	2	2	2
TOTAL	25	26	23

(Latin, Technical and Training, and Music — Optional subjects which may be added or continued after 1st year.)

10 The Times Educational Supplement, 1963.

11 French is the first preference, followed by English and German. The old emphasis on textbook study and grammar is slowly giving way to an oral approach (Gallesi, 1964).

If your Italian student had wanted to go on to a classical lycée, he would have had to take a special examination in Latin. For any other branch of secondary education beyond the middle school, the intermediate school diploma (diploma di licenza) taken at the end of the middle school course, is the condition of entry.

Secondary Education

Lycées

Secondary education is dominated by the academic, classically-oriented lycées.[12] By comparison with the numbers attending vocational and technical schools, fewer students make their way into the lycées,[13] but the lycées are high in prestige and competition for entry is fierce.

Both the classical and the scientific lycées offer five-year courses for students aged 14 to 19. The courses are divided into two parts, and students must pass an examination to go from one stage to the next. The final certificate awarded by the lycée opens the door to almost all branches of higher education, and has for a long time been the only passport into the universities.

Latin and Greek still dominate the curriculum in the classical lycées. The curriculum is similar in the scientific lycées, but more time is spent on mathematics and science, and on a modern language. The classroom atmosphere is formal and authoritarian; natural science tends to be taught by demonstration rather than participation.

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12 The Italian lycées are similar to the French and German schools, and to the Greek gymnasia.

13 In 1960, 13.8% of the secondary school population aged 14 were in lycées, compared with 51.3% of the same age attending vocational and technical schools and institutes (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965).

TABLE 2

SAMPLE CURRICULUM IN A CLASSICAL LYCÉE

Subject	Hours Per Week	
	First Part (Two Years)	Second Part (Three Years)
Italian	5	4
Latin	5	4
Greek	4	3
Modern Language (French, English German)	4	-
History (ancient or modern)	2	3
Geography	2	-
Philosophy	-	3
Maths and Physics	2	3 to 5
Natural Science	-	4 to 2
History of Art	-	1 to 2
Religion	1	1
Physical Edducation	2	2
TOTAL	27	28 to 29

Technical and Vocational Schools

Technical and vocational education is fragmented, with an enormous variety of institutions, public and private, courses varying in length from two to five years, and ranging from training for the tourist and hotel trades to nautical courses.

Vocational schools were a post-war innovation aimed at improving the education standard of the skilled worker. Courses are mostly practical and last two to three years. They offer no access to higher education although in some instances a student may be able to transfer to a technical institute for further study. The institutes train technicians and people for junior management in many fields, from agriculture to a special training in dietetics for girls. Each institute offers its own diploma, which may provide access, under certain conditions, to specific university faculties. Courses usually last five years, with a period of general education in the first two years. There are also a number of company schools, founded by major industries such as Fiat and Olivetti, for the training of their own personnel. Their courses last three to five years and the most outstanding students may go on to university (Volpicelli, 1961).

Technical and vocational training is in a period of transition in Italy, away from the formerly specialized courses towards a more general training which can adapt to the changing needs of the economy. Curricula and teaching methods are in an experimental stage. The most severe problem is the shortage of qualified teachers, and the financial rewards of industry continue to lure many people away from teaching.

Artistic Training

A number of schools and institutes offer courses in the fine and and applied arts. Some lead directly to employment, others to further study

at an institute of applied arts, an academy of fine arts or a university Faculty of Architecture.

Higher Education

The Universities

Half of the present state universities were established by the middle of the fourteenth century and they, even more than the lycees, are the bastions of classical traditions in Italy. All the universities are run by the state, except for a few Catholic institutions, and are under the administration of the Ministry of Public Instruction. The period of general education is considered to have ended with secondary schooling, and courses tend to be more specialized and concentrated than they are in Canadian universities. Most courses last four years although some, such as engineering and architecture, are five and medicine is six. The campus setting is rare in Italy and most buildings are scattered, the Faculty being the most common unit. There is little community or residential life (Chapman, 1962).

Many people are concerned that the universities are too remote from present-day society, that courses and teaching methods are too rigid. Teacher-student relationships are remote and unsatisfactory; there is little help available for students, and the drop-out rate may be as high as 50% (Rugiu, 1967). In addition, there is a shortage of buildings and equipment is often inadequate. The most controversial question is that of access to the universities, but there appears to be a gradual movement now towards making university places available to students other than lycée graduates (Volpicelli, 1961).

A Final Note

The chances are that the Italian student in front of you comes from a small village in the south of Italy or Sicily. If this is so, he has probably not had the same opportunity for schooling as his contemporaries in the north. He is less likely to have gone to kindergarten, or to have attended school regularly during the period of compulsory education. He may have had to repeat one or more years or have dropped out of the system before he was 14. The girls in his family would probably have dropped out even sooner, and would have had even less chance of going on to secondary school.

If your student's parents had a small plot of land, they would have needed their son to work it with the other men in the family, and it would have been difficult for them to see the relevance of education to this kind of working life. His father might have had only a few years of spasmodic schooling, his mother might be barely literate. Your student has been brought up strictly, without many of the comforts which have become necessities to the northerners. Perhaps there was no running water in his house, or no stove, and his mother had to go to a neighbour's to cook their meals. Small wonder that parents such as these, who have lived their lives in poverty and near despair, may feel driven to leave the south in search of a better life for themselves and their families.

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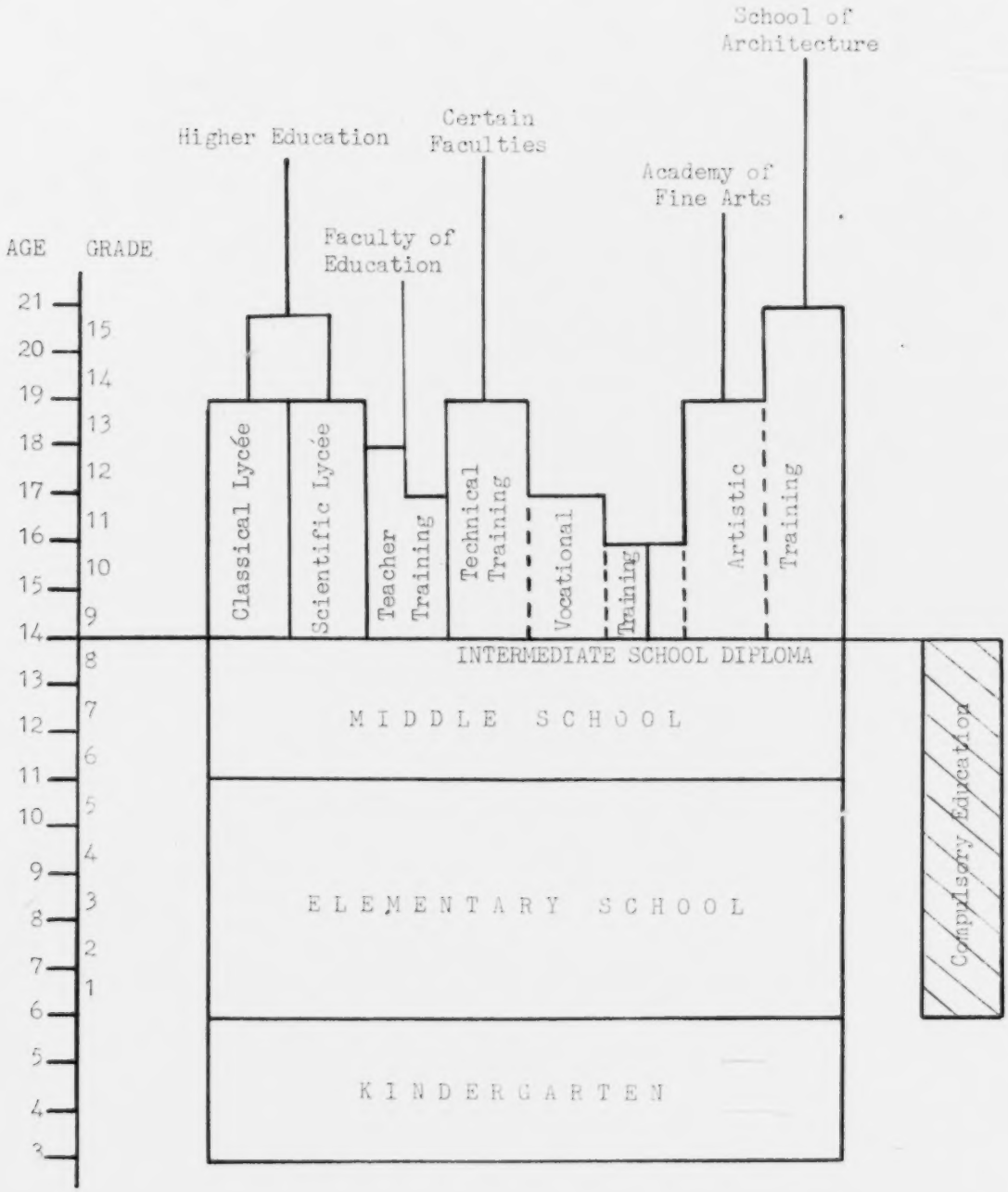
APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

EDUCATION SYSTEM OF ITALY*



* Taken from Council of Europe, 1965.

APPENDIX II

SOME COMPARATIVE FIGURES

Characteristics	Canada	Italy
Population (1966)*	19,271,000	51,090,000
Area Sq. Miles*	3,851,824	116,304
Illiteracy (1968)**	Less than 1%	8.4%
Annual Income Per Capita $ Canadian (1965)**	2,075	989
Distribution of Labour Force (1966)*		
(1) Agriculture	11.2%	25.6%
(2) Industry	33.5%	41.2%
(3) Others	55.3%	33.2%

* NATO Information Service, 1966.

** Bonnett, Lorelies, & Kyriazias. "The Good Earth...Or Is It?" (Article in The Telegram, January 25, 1969).